

Exercising Prayer that Scatters Demons

What Does It Mean to Pray in the Spirit?

By Leighann McCoy



Prayer is perhaps the most misunderstood and least exercised privilege of the believer and the Church. I'm convinced the devil works extra hard to keep things this way because prayer is the one thing we do that terrifies him most.

When we pray, God's power flows from heaven to earth. And when God's power flows, God's purposes prevail. His Kingdom advances and Satan's schemes to stop Him are wrecked. This is the kind of prayer that causes demons to scatter. Deuteronomy 28:7 illustrates this warfare principle: "The Lord will grant that the enemies who rise up against you will be defeated before you. They will come at you from one direction but flee from you in seven."

Paul encouraged the Ephesians to pray the kind of prayer that

is alert to the opposition believers experience in this world: “*Pray in the Spirit* on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord’s people” (Eph. 6:18, italics added).

Paul reveals a key to Kingdom-praying with the phrase, *pray in the Spirit*. Jude also exhorted us to pray in the Spirit: “You, dear friends, by building yourselves up in your most holy faith and *praying in the Holy Spirit*, keep yourselves in God’s love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life” (Jude 20–21, italics added).

What did Paul and Jude mean when they wrote this? Let’s look at various interpretations.

On the One Hand

Some Pentecostals use the term, *pray in the Spirit*, to mean prayer released through the spiritual “gift of tongues.” To pray in the Spirit is to yield complete control of your physical tongue and vocal chords to the Holy Spirit, allowing Him to express His heart through your voice. Those who experience “prayer in the Spirit” report that this is a powerful and delightful way to pray.

As scriptural basis, they cite Romans 8:26–27: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God’s people in accordance with the will of God.”

In other words, the Holy Spirit intercedes for us with groans that are too deep for words, thus praying from the inside of us, here on earth, to the inside of God sitting on His throne in heaven. Those with this view call this exercising their “prayer language.”

Even though the pray-er doesn't know what is being said, the experience itself is supernatural, and the accompanying peace that praying in the Spirit releases assures the pray-er that whatever was said was "spot on."

What a marvelous exchange this must be!

On the Other Hand

Other evangelicals believe that prayer in the Spirit is prayer inspired and directed by the Holy Spirit without His taking over their tongues and vocal chords in an unknown language. Prayer in the Spirit, then, is the experience of the Holy Spirit's power directing their thoughts so that they pray with supernatural discernment and perspective.

Those with this view believe that to pray in the Spirit is to pray, knowing what is being said, and then being encouraged by that understanding. As biblical basis, they cite 1 Corinthians 14:13–14: "For this reason the one who speaks in a tongue should pray that they may interpret what they say. For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful."

Paul indicated that praying in an unknown tongue encourages the Spirit but leaves his mind "unfruitful." More "conservative" evangelical pray-ers testify to experiences in prayer that are both powerful and enlightening as they come out of their prayer closets knowing exactly the conversation held with the Lord.

Both groups—Pentecostals, who enjoy their prayer language, and evangelicals, who enjoy their conversations with the Lord—have powerful prayer lives. Because of this, I pose the question, "Does it really matter which interpretation you follow?"

I find my heart resonating with Paul's words when he continued, "So what shall I do? I will pray with my spirit,

but I will also pray with my understanding; I will sing with my spirit, but I will also sing with my understanding” (v. 15).

The important thing is to pray! And I believe that even our interest in prayer indicates that the Spirit is leading us—and therefore our prayers themselves qualify as being “in the Spirit.” Let me explain.

The Spirit’s Role in Prayer

In John 14 Jesus introduced us to the third Person of our triune God. The Holy Spirit is the presence of God that has come to stay with us until this world passes away. We are united with God the Father and Christ Jesus His Son in heaven. The Holy Spirit keeps us connected to God while we are living our earthly lives. (Read John 14 to get a better understanding of the Holy Spirit and His role within us today.)

Because prayer is the lifeline of our relationship with God, to “pray in the Spirit” is to experience the power of the Holy Spirit as He motivates us and guides our prayers. The following describes in more detail how the Spirit works.

1. **The Spirit is our prayer motivator.** In the natural (as opposed to the supernatural), we are not compelled to pray. Without a Spirit-infused connection with God, there’s no need to pray. Our flesh does not naturally seek intimacy with God.

Unfortunately, many of us are unaware of the difference our God-connection makes in our everyday lives. Familiar phrases indicate our predicament of living in the natural as we strive to experience the supernatural: “You’re on your own” or “Make the most of it.”

In their natural limitations, unbelievers “make do.” If

they're smart, they learn from their mistakes and fail forward. They apply lessons learned so they can make wiser decisions in the future.

But those of us who are "in Christ," have the Spirit of God living in us (Col. 2:9–10). And the Spirit of the living God reminds us that we are never on our own (Phil. 4:13). Our resources are unlimited (Phil. 4:19). So we never have to "make the most of it" because God has given us His Word to help us navigate life. And we find ourselves full of hope even in the darkest valleys.

The Spirit reminds us that God has promised to respond when we pray. The Spirit Himself led each person reading these words right now to do just that. The Person of God, dwelling inside, stirred that desire to connect with God through prayer. It's the Spirit who motivates us to pray.

2. The Spirit is our prayer guide. I love the way Paul explained the part the Holy Spirit plays when we pray. From Romans 8:26–27 we also see some incredible things the Holy Spirit does on our behalf:

- The Spirit helps us in our weakness.
- The Spirit intercedes for us when we don't know what we ought to pray.
- The Spirit feels for us so deeply that words cannot contain the depth of His love.
- The Spirit searches our hearts, and He also knows the mind of God. So the Spirit makes a divine connection with our human hearts and God's perfect will.

The longer I walk with the Lord, the more aware I am of the vast difference between His perspective and mine. The Holy Spirit, if we let Him, will guide our thoughts as we pray. He takes the reins in prayer when we surrender our minds and hearts to Him.

When we pray, we can first confess what we *do* know: that God

is Lord, He has supreme power in the universe, and He knows all things and does all things well. And then we can confess what we *don't* know. It's pointless to waste our emotional energy and time in prayer telling God how to do things!

When we read the Bible and allow the Spirit to guide our prayers, new thoughts will come, new insights will be revealed, and new prayers will begin to form in our hearts.

This is praying in the Spirit.

As Easy as Breathing

Because I've had cancer, I'm familiar with the CT scan. When you have a CT scan, you lie down on a shelf and then ride in and out of a circle of cameras that scan you internally. As you ride through the circle, the machine speaks aloud (in words you can understand):

"Breathe in."

"Hold your breath."

And just when you begin wondering if you might pass out, the machine says, "Breathe."

Prayer in the Spirit is like spiritual breathing. When Paul and Jude encouraged believers to pray in the Spirit, they were urging a heightened awareness of the Spirit's nudge to pray and a sensitivity to the Spirit's direction in their prayers.

In other words, they're telling us to quiet ourselves when we enter our prayer closets and let the Spirit of God tell us when to breathe. Here are some ways to do that:

- Breathe in. Focus your thoughts on the majesty, power, love, and wonder of God.
- Hold your breath. Ponder those thoughts about God's

character. Let them adjust your perspective on whatever concerns you have.

- Then breathe out. Exhale your praise and worship to your Mighty God.

Remember that the best way to know the heart and mind of God is by reading His Word.

- Breathe in His heart and mind revealed through Scripture.
- Exhale your requests as you allow the Word of God to align your petitions with His best.
- Breathe in the assurance that God hears you when you pray.
- Hold your breath by letting the Spirit immerse you in peace.
- Finally, breathe again, knowing that whatever you've prayed is now secure in His hands.

Whether you breathe in a language with words you understand or a language indiscernible to your human ears, the most important thing is to yield your limited understanding to God's magnificent knowledge. Submit your lesser agenda to His much better ideas.

Pray in the Spirit and watch those demons scatter.

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